

Sharada Nayak

By Marilyn Turkovich and Jonathan Weil



Sharada Nayak. If you know the name, more than likely when you hear it, you smile, and then your mind catapults you into remembering a story about the woman who has become synonymous with India. For over thirty-five years Sharada welcomed U.S. teachers and administrators to India as director of the Education Resource Centre and later as executive director of the United States Information Agency in India. Anyone fortunate enough to have received a Fulbright or Fulbright Hays Summer Abroad grant knew immediately they were in caring and competent hands when Sharada greeted them at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi airport. Equally they knew their life had been enriched and challenged because of the opportunity of seeing a new culture through the eyes of one of its most endearing ambassadors.

Memorable teachers help us understand who we are in the midst of a complex interconnected world. What most of us, under Sharada's tutelage, learned about India has been reflected in the windows and mirrors of our own history, values and in the way in which we live our lives. How many of us continue to reflect on the lessons we have learned not only because of our travel, but because of the woman who introduced us to ourselves in a strange new land?

Turkovich/Weil: *To what extent did your coming of age during the independence movement shape the way you think about India today? Which other influences helped shape your identity as an Indian, a Hindu and a global citizen?*

Sharada Nayak: My first visit to the U.S., as a scholarship recipient to Briarcliff Junior College from the United Nations Students Association, planted a seed in my mind that stirred and drew life from a new climate of internationalism. It was a time when the world, too, was expanding with a renewal of growth after World War II. India, newly independent, was reaching out to countries around the world and making its voice heard at the United Nations. It was a time of an international vision and a stirring of people's movements in countries of Asia.

The shining idealism of students in my college and university, the leadership of statesmen like Nehru, Gandhi and the other great leaders of India's independence movement, were real and close. As students we had opportunities to meet and hear these leaders, and it stimulated our minds and hearts in a way that was lasting and internalized by us. I was probably the only young person—I was fifteen—to have a privileged seat in the Parliament House at the midnight session of India's constituent assembly, thanks to an uncle who was one of the assembly members. Hearing Nehru make his famous speech as India gained her Independence on August 15, 1947, calling it "India's Tryst with Destiny," left an indelible mark on me, sustaining my love, pride and commitment to India. The idealism has stayed with me through all these decades of bad and good times for India and the world. Today, the present generation of youth appears to lack commitment to democracy and national identity. Often they appear to be cynical about the future. I realize this is due to the lack of leadership and role models in

their lives. My father, a civil servant, was closely associated with Independent India's governance, working in the office of Prime Minister Nehru, later G. B. Pant, the Home Minister, and just before retirement with President Rajendra Prasad. This obviously had an impact on my growing up, and on my perspective on India and the world.

Turkovich/Weil: *You speak of role models. You mentioned Nehru and Gandhi. Who else has been an inspiration to you, your thinking and attitudes about India and culture generally?*

Sharada Nayak: Not nearly as many outside the borders of India know of the Bengali Rabindranath Tagore. He was a Renaissance man in the greatest sense—a writer, composer, philosopher, painter, educator and humanitarian. In a speech, titled "To Make the Distant Near," I began my talk at the Conference of the Committee for Teaching About Asia, Association of Asian Studies in Washington, D.C. in March 1989, with a poem by Tagore.

*Thou hast made known to me friends I knew not,
Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own
Thou hast brought the distant near
And made a brother of the stranger.*

*I am uneasy at heart
When I have to leave my accustomed shelter
I forget that there abidest Thou
The old in the new*

*When one knows Thee then
Alien there is none, then no door is shut.
Grant me my prayer,
That I may never lose the bliss of the touch
Of the one, in the play of the many.*

This well-known poem from Tagore's *Gitanjali*, for which he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, has been a source of inspiration to me in my work for more than the two decades I have been involved in intercultural education. Through my work I have gained immeasurable richness in friendships, and through the hospitality I have received in America where "I have found seats in homes not my own." Every year I have the special experience of greeting strangers to India, striving to make brothers and sisters of them. I cannot think of any other job that would interest me more, or that is more rewarding in human terms.

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given place and historical time. Each one of us stands at an intersection of time and space, of geography and history, and that gives us our coordinates for a cultural view. For instance, I always find it fascinating that Americans of an immigrant background, particularly students whose parents have recently emigrated to the U.S., carry with them an imprint of their culture and see another culture differently, than a New England Yankee or an African-American from the South. To all of them India is different and exotic, but their responses to my explanations of a cultural practice in India are entirely different.

Another good friend, Seymour Fersh, wrote about students' affective responses

to cultural learning, which would also describe teachers' responses. They fell into these types of interchanges:

Responses that are factual and contain information:

I never knew that.

Responses that reveal a higher level of thinking, resulting from introspection:

I never thought of that.

Responses that are more affective and emotional:

I never felt that.

Responses that reflect a recognition that one's own life can be what others have created:

I never appreciated that.

Responses that indicate an awareness of dynamic ways in which cultural behavior is holistic:

I never realized that.

An increased awareness of cultural behavior, an ability to transcend one's own cultural conditioning to feel, appreciate and realize, is a lasting impact of an intercultural experience. It not only makes one a better teacher, it makes a person a more sensitive human being who is able to relate to another's problems, whether it be the new student in school from an immigrant family, or the "different" beliefs and practices of people of another faith.

Turkovich/Weil: *How did you become involved in the United States Education Foundation in India (USEFI), and would you share some of your most memorable experiences in working with educators from India and the United States? How important is "in-country" experience in building understanding between different cultures and traditions?*

Sharada Nayak: For fifteen years until 1980 I worked with the Educational Resources Centre, an agency funded by the U.S. Office of Education and administered by the New York State Education department, to develop curriculum about India for U.S. schools and undergraduate colleges. In 1980 the Centre lost its funding and was closed down. It was fortuitous that the Fulbright office in India, the U.S. Educational Foundation, was looking for an Executive Director, and I was selected for that position. I continued there for twelve years until I retired in 1992. I then revived the Educational Resources Centre as a

Turkovich/Weil: *What is the current feeling about Gandhi and the independence movement? How are Gandhi's principles taught and experienced by students?*

Sharada Nayak: Gandhi is revered as the Father of the Nation. In school lessons, Gandhi and his principles are taught, and students learn about his life, work, and his leadership of the freedom movement. There is also discussion about his ideals in public forums. However, there prevails a reappraisal and a sadness that his principles of nonviolence seem to be neglected in public life as one sees the decline in present society. The recent violence in Gandhi's home state of Gujarat has affected us deeply, and we remember him and wonder how we can reawaken all the values that he stood for—love and brotherhood—respect for all religions. We need to do much more than teach youth about him as a great figure in our history; we need to strive to be role models and bring his values into public life.

Turkovich/Weil: *Many teachers have been introduced to and learned to love India through the Fulbright program. What continues to excite you about helping educators from the U.S. learn about the history and culture of India? What impact do you feel the Fulbright program has had on elementary and secondary education?*

Sharada Nayak: The personal immersion in another culture, however brief, leaves a lasting impact. It must be remembered that Senator Fulbright drew his inspiration, and introduced the bill for the Fulbright-Hays Act, because of his own experience as a Rhodes scholar in England. I find it always exciting to "see" the interest, the questioning and the dialogue that ensues when a Fulbright teacher comes to India for the first time.

The questions are often the same: about caste, about Hinduism, about the poverty that they see. But the dialogue is always different because people are different, their views on life are different, and above all their perspectives on the world are from a different vantage point. My own learning about India, about people, grows out of these encounters, and I have grown through my 30 years of experience with international exchanges. I learned long ago from a wise teacher, Elgin Heinz, of San Francisco, that one's identity and consequently one's interpretation of life comes from where one stands in a

nonprofit charitable trust, with the same mission—how to teach and learn about India, its society and culture.

The Fulbright program has emphasized higher education more than school education. School teacher exchanges were once part of the program in the 'sixties but were discontinued. This was before I came to USEFI, so I cannot comment on them. I am only aware of the Fulbright study tours in the summer with which I was intimately involved. These obviously had less of a two-way impact in that they had a unique transformation for the visiting Americans who saw a cross section of Indian life and were exposed to significant personal experiences. This was perhaps less so for the Indians they saw or met briefly, who welcomed them with hospitality accorded to visitors. Theirs was perhaps less of a lasting impression, unless a closer contact was established by some individuals. The larger Fulbright program was a two-way exchange where college professors, researchers, and graduate students went to teach and conduct research, and the collaboration with their counterparts from the other country were valuable both to them professionally and in their contribution to academic life in the host country. The collaboration between institutes and departments of study often continued long after the Fulbright recipient returned home and had a lasting impact on academic life.

In my opinion, the age of an applicant is not important. Most important is emotional maturity, flexibility and an exploring spirit; an ability to adjust to a diverse group of people, for inevitably in a short visit to a foreign country it has to be a group program with little opportunity for independent interests. Nevertheless, it is in a group endeavor that it is often possible to discuss teaching methods and identify teaching aids and resources. In my experience many of these associations continue when the participants return home and are able to continue their collaboration and sharing of ideas and resources.

The most significant changes are those that have been brought about by the technological revolution. Computers, e-mail and the Internet are increasingly the tools of communication. Communication is instant, it is personal, and it is available for everyone—even in small schools, in small towns, in India. The flip side is that people are receiving information without the intellectual tools to process it and to learn through a personal intercultural dimension. This puts a greater responsibility on a teacher because young people are hooked to their computers without perceiving relationships and applying what has been learned. The computer-savvy child is often a lonely child, whose contacts are faceless people on the chat line and on e-mail. The challenge lies in knowing how to make the classroom a microcosm of the outer world where living together, group interaction, conflict resolution, and inculcating the values of human relationships become as important as, if not more than, acquiring information.

There is often no space for the teacher to help students synthesize their overall understanding of what they have acquired from the electronic media. The visual media carries innumerable TV channels and programs from all countries, and news is also instantly carried around the globe. However, the media often does not play a responsible role in its portrayal of events

around the world, and using TV as a teaching tool in understanding international events is a difficult task for any teacher.

Turkovich/Weil: *Both India and the United States laud our diversity. However, both nations continue to suffer from the divisiveness of discrimination, racial hate, religious intolerance and economic inequality. As educators, what can we do to combat extremism and increase tolerance between people? Are there lessons from our past that can help us as we move forward in this new millennium?*

Sharada Nayak: My goal and dearest wish at this point in my life is to establish a Diversity Learning Centre where multicultural studies would bring together people from other countries in this region, and with democratic societies like the U.S., where we can share our experiences in pluralism, in dealing with diversity each in our own country. The problems that we face in India are not unique, and we try to solve them within a democratic framework. A Center for international research on multiculturalism, teacher training, student study projects, and documentation/dissemination would be invaluable at the present time.

I am pained by the violence and prejudice that has surfaced, particularly after Sept 11. It has been dormant, but now there is overt discrimination, hate and prejudice expressed in many countries. In India, where we have never really overcome the trauma of Partition over fifty years ago, the sporadic violence and death of innocents make me more determined to build defenses in the hearts and minds of our children. There are moments of discouragement, but I know that there are enough people who are concerned and whose voices must be heard, whose efforts at harmony must be encouraged and supported. If we all raise our voices and listen to our conscience, I know that sanity will prevail.

Turkovich/Weil: *What should U.S. students be taught about India? Conversely, what should Indian children know about the United States? In your estimation, what responsibilities do educators have to help prepare students for living in our interdependent world?*

Sharada Nayak: What would I want American students to learn? The meaning of the word “humility” and “humiliation.” Both these words are the other side of the word “arrogance.” To most people of the world, America is seen as the richest and most powerful nation on earth. Arrogance is often seen as the consequence of wealth and power. As individuals, *whatever our nationality*, if we are seen as wealthy and privileged, it behooves us to reach out to help and give, with *humility*—but not as charity. Because it is difficult to give without arrogance and to receive without humiliation. This brings the lesson down to the personal level—our attitudes towards the poor in our own neighborhood, and our sympathy for the oppressed anywhere—not necessarily politically oppressed because poverty is also oppressive. Whatever a government does for poverty alleviation, it is the small nongovernmental organizations that are doing the most effective work through involvement in the problems of the deprived.

NOTE: Reflecting on Sharada’s answer above, it seems appropriate to borrow a few lines from a speech she gave at the Conference

of the Committee for Teaching Asia, at the Association of Asian Studies Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. on March 16, 1989.

I look at the universality of human experiences which is really the basis of any understanding—between people, between nations, as well as between cultures. Some of you may have heard about the navarasas, the nine emotions that are described in Indian dance music and literature. The moods of the ragas in Indian music depict these, the powerful exaggerated mime in Kathakali dance dramatizes these vividly, unforgettable in their expressive intensity. The word rasa is often loosely translated as “emotions,” but it is much more than that. It is the essence of human experience. Many times the nine rasas are enumerated differently, in different serial order, but there appears to be a common factor: the first is love, the last is peace. Wedged in between are heroism, anger, fear disgust, compassion, laughter and wonder.

Turkovich/Weil: *What is in your future? How are you applying your life principles and experience to make a difference now?*

Sharada Nayak: This brings me to what I am doing now. I am involved with a campus diversity initiative funded by the Ford Foundation where we are working with over fifty colleges and seven universities all over India, in addressing the issues of diversity. Through this program, of which my educational trust is the co-coordinator, I have been involved in working towards harmony and greater inclusion of different social groups, of combating discrimination and supporting those marginalized. It is not only through education that this can be done. Equally important is the changing of personal development and the forming of attitudes. Parental upbringing and peer pressure are forces all teachers recognize. The means to effectively guide a student, in my opinion, is to make him or her strengthen one's own potential, develop greater self-confidence and optimism. There is an all-pervasive cynicism among adolescents today, about society and its values, about money power and political corruption. Perhaps I see my work as an important component of an education that otherwise seems to merely provide information and little else.

Turkovich/Weil: *Thank you very much for granting us this interview.*

Sharada Nayak: It was my pleasure. ■

MARILYN TURKOVICH first encountered Sharada Nayak in 1979 when she and two colleagues, Peggy Mueller and Carol Hansen, received a grant from the Education Resource Centre (ERC). She returned to India a number of years later as a Fulbright recipient and then as a National Security in Education Project grantee. She continues her association with Sharada as a member of the newly constituted ERC Board.

JONATHAN WEIL traveled to India on a Fulbright Study Abroad Program in 1987. Now, as Director of Los Angeles Center for International Studies, he continues to organize teacher workshops and study tours to Asia for classroom teachers in California. With Sharada, he plans reunions for India Fulbrighter alums when she is in the United States.

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